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ABSTRACT

Although listening provides a foundation for all aspects of language and cognitive development and plays a lifelong role in the processes of learning and communication essential to productive participation in life, there is a tendency for teachers not to emphasize listening objectives. Even though no widely accepted model for listening has been developed, several researchers have linked listening skills to reading skills, and processing models for reading contribute to the understanding of listening. The developing discussion of listening has contributed to directions in the classroom. Choate and Rakes (1987), for example, present a structured listening activity not unlike one that would promote reading comprehension. Questioning, usually by the teacher, is the key to most of the instructional strategies in the literature about teaching listening. Although some argue that listening should be taught as a separate mode, the tendency of many teaching methodologies and techniques on listening to draw on theory, objectives, and skills more established in the other language modes seems reasonable. (Nineteen references are attached). (ARH)

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Listening: Are we teaching it, and if so, how?

by Nancy B. Hyslop and Bruce Tone

Listening is the first language mode that children acquire. It provides a foundation for all aspects of language and cognitive development, and it plays a life-long role in the processes of learning and communication essential to productive participation in life. A study by Wilt (1950), which found that people listen 45 percent of the time they spend communicating, is still widely cited (*e.g.*, Martin, 1987; Strother, 1987). Wilt found that 30 percent of communication time was spent speaking, 16 percent reading, and 9 percent writing. That finding confirmed what Rankin had found in 1928, when he reported that people spent 70 percent of their waking time communicating and that three-fourths of this time was spent listening and speaking.

One might assume, then, that the development of listening skills gets considerable attention in our schools; but that does not appear to be the case. Burley-Allen (1982) found the classroom emphasis on language modes to be inversely related to the time people use them: students get 12 years of formal training in writing, 6-8 years in reading, 1-2 years in speaking, and from 0-1/2 year in listening. Swanson (1984b) calls this the "inverted curriculum."

Curriculum guides usually call for more extensive instruction in listening than children get; for as Swanson (1984a) found, there is a tendency for teachers not to emphasize the listening objectives. Many studies in the ERIC database suggest that educators have assumed that listening develops naturally (*e.g.*, Abelleira, 1987).

Another reason that listening is not emphasized may be that not having experienced much instruction on effective listening themselves, teachers are not certain how best to teach it. A study by Swanson (1986) suggests that teachers are not apt to get much training on teaching listening. His survey of 15 textbooks used in teacher education programs revealed that out of a total of 3,704 pages of text, only 82 pages mentioned listening.

How can listening be defined?

No widely accepted model for listening has developed in the past 10-15 years as one has in reading. The emerging processing model for reading has been intriguing and has led to close scrutiny of existing reading instructional materials and assessment instruments and to innovative attempts to develop new ones. For listening, no such conclusive model has yet emerged to direct extensive development of instructional materials.

The processing models for reading, however, contribute to our understanding of listening; and more than any other approaches to defining listening, appear to influence instruction. Pearson and Fielding (1983), among others, link listening skills to reading skills. They feel that reading and listening make use of similar language comprehension processes. As does reading, they maintain, listening involves the simultaneous orchestration of skills in phonology, syntax, semantics, and knowledge of text structure – all of which seem to be controlled by the same set of cognitive processes.

One aspect of listening which relates to high levels of comprehension may be more relevant to listening than to reading. Thomlison's (1984) definition of listening includes "active listening," which goes beyond comprehending literally to an empathetic understanding of the speaker. Gordon (1985) sees empathy as essential to listening and contends that it is more than a polite attempt to identify a speaker's perspectives – that it expands to "nonegocentric prosocial behavior" that altruistically accepts concern for the speaker's welfare and interests. Gordon admits, however, that a problem with research on empathy has been a lack of conceptual clarity.

Coakley (1985) tends to define listening skills as the opposites of negative attitudes. She discusses one common negative listening attitude as self-centeredness – as opposed to being "other-oriented" with a genuine interest in others that leads to acknowledging another person's comments by asking open-ended questions. Disrespect, another negative listening attitude, is shown by sending "superiority" signals and/or by interrupting.

In a careful attempt to compile a definition of listening as a synthesis of many other definitions, Hirsch (1986) treats aspects that span neurological responses and interpretation of sound to understanding and assigning meaning by reacting, selecting meaning, remembering, attending, analyzing, and incorporating previous experience. He groups definitions as 1) attempts to define the process; 2) explanations of sequential phases in listening – how sound is received, comprehended, and acted upon; and 3) generalist definitions that examine aspects of listening without sequencing them or relating each to the others as part of a process. Hirsch's own definition presents numerous components that do not suggest any sequential model but leave one free to focus on particular aspects of listening without attempting to oversimplify the complexity of how they may relate to each other.

What teaching methods should work?

A sampling of methodologies for teaching listening described in the ERIC database illustrates how the developing discussion of listening – particularly as it relates to reading – is contributing to directions in the classroom.

After reviewing relationships between listening and reading, Choate and Rakes (1987) offer a structured listening activity not unlike one that would promote reading comprehension. Four major steps that lead to comprehension of a selection read aloud by the teacher include 1) developing the concepts in the text by promoting discussion that ties the concepts to the students' backgrounds, 2) establishing a directive purpose for listening, 3) using visual aids while reading aloud to help the students focus attention and to reinforce concepts, and 4) asking questions that promote both literal and interpretive or critical responses.

Shoop (1986) proposes a technique that she says is equally successful in building listening, reading, or a combination of listening and reading comprehension. A narrative text is selected to be read aloud, silently, or both. The

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teacher interrupts at several places to call a spontaneous news conference in which the students play investigative reporters at the scene of one of the story events. Their questioning promotes interpretive and critical responses.

Abelleira argues that listening should be taught as a separate mode. The first three of five components in her approach to introducing listening to first graders are included to make sure that the pupils understand how the auditory system functions, have some grasp of the science of sound, and know some rules that relate to successful group discussion. The last two components are a list of objectives for the instruction: the students should learn to decode; follow verbal instructions; infer word meanings; listen for details, sequence, and main idea; distinguish fact from opinion; and identify mood. These objectives matched closely the instrument that Abelleira used to demonstrate that the method is effective. Interestingly, they are also very compatible with those on many standardized reading tests.

Questioning, usually by the teacher, is the key to most of the instructional strategies in the literature about teaching listening. Coakley's contention that listeners need to be "other oriented" is reflected in a lesson described by Desjardins (1987). The instructor asked deliberately difficult questions after reading some text to college students. As was expected, the students began objecting that having only listened to the material, they found the questions based on it unreasonably difficult. The instructor encouraged this discussion which led to the students volunteering that they had not made the most serious effort to comprehend and were inclined to put the burden of communication on the speaker when they listened.

Lundsteen (1985) points out that the quality and appeal of what one is asked to listen to is instrumental in determining how well a listener attends and suggests that the same textual qualities that promote attentive reading comprehension should promote more skillful listening.

Ronald and Roskelly (1985) define listening as an active process requiring the same skills of prediction, hypothesizing, checking, revising, and generalizing that writing and reading demand; and they present specific exercises to make students active listeners to the same "inner voice" one hears when writing.

The tendency of many teaching methodologies and techniques on listening to draw on theory, objectives, and skills more established in the other language modes seems reasonable. The interest in empathy may ultimately distinguish a listening model from those of the other language modes; on the other hand, it is not yet clear why empathy would not also be relevant to reading. The neglect of listening may, in fact, be most efficiently remedied by transferring what is practiced in developing reading, writing, and speaking proficiencies and skills.

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